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As Congress attempts to calm a roiling economy, a group of freshman House members have proposed freezing their own pay to show voters that politicians are not exempt from the nation's financial woes.

Rep. Harry Mitchell, a first-term Democrat from Arizona, has sponsored legislation that would prevent the \$4,100 automatic pay adjustments from kicking in for members next year.

Even though Mitchell could not persuade his own party leaders to include his salary freeze bill in the economic stimulus package currently being debated, he did manage to sway 15 members to co-sponsor the measure - 10 of them freshman lawmakers. He also managed to convince three Republicans to back the measure, most notably presidential candidate Ron Paul (R-Texas). Mitchell sponsored a similar bill last year that drew 29 co-sponsors, half of them freshmen.

"I just think we want to let people know that we share their frustration, we don't want to insulate ourselves from the economic crisis that we have in front of us," said Mitchell, who was first elected to Congress in 2006.

Freezing congressional salaries is hardly a new idea on Capitol Hill. Lawmakers have floated similar proposals in every year dating back to 1995, and long before that. Though the concept of forgoing a raise has attracted support from more senior members, it is most popular with freshman lawmakers, who are often the most vulnerable.

New sponsors are rarely deterred by previous attempts that have failed to make it out of committee (not counting unsuccessful procedural attempts by supporters to call the legislation up directly on the floor). By backing such a bill, first-term lawmakers can go back to their districts and tell voters they tried to make a small difference in the budget.

This year's bill seems destined for the same fate, though leadership has yet to dismiss the bill's chances outright. Rep. Barney Frank (Mass.), one of the chamber's most senior Democrats, said he will not be backing it because lawmakers, like the voters they represent, work hard for the raise they receive - and those who do not deserve to be sent home by those same voters.

"If you look at the responsibilities of Congress, they're enormous," said Frank, chairman of the House Financial Services Committee and a key architect of the stimulus package. "We need to separate the job and the individual. If people don't deserve it, we should kick them out."

Legislation freezing House salaries would certainly find support among some of the chamber's most vocal fiscal hawks, if they believed the proposal were going somewhere.

"I have no problem looking across the aisle on this but usually it doesn't get too far," said Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.), who is not co-sponsoring the bill.

When Republicans took control of Congress in 1995, Rep. Roscoe Bartlett (R-Md.) gathered 22 co-sponsors on a similar bill to discontinue automatic pay raises for members; more than half of his support came from freshman lawmakers.

Member raises, which would total more than \$1.7 million for all 435 lawmakers next year, are often characterized as examples of wasteful spending, especially when many members' districts are in financial despair.

"You don't have to go beyond the barbershop or the beauty shop or the local rotary club to find people who are annoyed that members of Congress seem removed from the thoughts and concerns of ordinary Americans," said fifth-term Rep. Rush Holt (D-N.J.), who is co-sponsoring the measure.

Mitchell, a Democrat in a heavily Republican district, defeated Republican Rep. J.D. Hayworth in 2006 in what ended up being one of the nation's closest races. Now he is a prime target for the National Republican Congressional Committee, which said it is keeping a close eye on his seat as one that carries potential to be reclaimed.

And while a spokesman for Mitchell said he is not specifically targeting freshmen for support, he conceded that a more fiscally responsible Congress is what first got the freshmen elected and serves as a common platform for supporting the measure. If the measure does not pass, Mitchell and several other freshman co-sponsors are planning to donate their salary increases to charities in their district.

Regardless of the outcome, the proposal has allowed the newest members of the Democratic Congress to develop a partnership with Paul, who is seeking the Republican nomination for president on a more independent platform. Paul is no stranger to crossing the aisle, having worked with Democrats opposing the war in Iraq and the passage of the USA Patriot Act. Both Paul's and Mitchell's offices said they see the economic timing as the bill's key strength and that because of the country's financial turmoil, the measure, if it makes it out of committee, will not see any vocal opponents.

"I think those that are probably opposed to it are just saying nothing," Mitchell said.